

The American Veteran
Episode 4, Part 1

BENSON

IM BENSON, HOST: NEXT ON "THE AMERICAN VETERAN," DISABLED VETERANS TAKE TO THE SLOPES; A FRESH START FOR THE BLIND AT HINES; KEEPING WOMEN VETERANS HEALTHY AND V.A. PREPARES OUR NEWEST VETERANS FOR NEW CAREERS.

BENSON: HELLO. I'M JIM BENSON.

WELCOME TO THIS EDITION OF "THE AMERICAN VETERAN," A PUBLIC AFFAIRS PROGRAM PRODUCED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS. EACH MONTH WE PROFILE SERVICES AND BENEFITS THAT YOU AS A VETERAN CAN USE.

IN OUR FIRST STORY, WE TAKE YOU TO SNOWMASS, COLORADO, SITE OF THE 19th NATIONAL DISABLED VETERANS WINTER SPORTS CLINIC, WHICH IS SPONSORED BY THE DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS AND THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS . OVER 350 SERVICE MEMBERS PARTICIPATED, INCLUDING MORE THAN 50 WHO RECENTLY SERVED IN AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ. JON LIEBERMAN HAS MORE.

VIDEO OF VETERANS SKIING RIFING SKI LIFT, SNORLELING AND ROCK CLIMBING.

VETERAN: I LIVE EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR JUST FOR THIS WEEK. I LOVE IT.

BO DEREK, ACTRESS: YOU ONLY HAVE TO BE HERE ABOUT TEN MINUTES BEFORE YOU THINK, OKAY, THIS IS GOOD.

VETERAN WITH TWO PROSTHETIC AREMS, LAUGHING: LOOK, MA. NO HANDS!

VOUNTEER FROM CLEVELAND VA MEDICAL CENTER: YOU CAN RECOGNIZE YOUR ABILITIES OR YOU CAN RECOGNIZE YOUR DISABILITIES. YOU MAKE YOUR CHOICE. OUT HERE YOU RECOGNIZE YOUR ABILITIES.

LIEBERMAN: FRESH OFF THE BATTLEFIELDS AND SKIING FOR THE FIRST TIME, DISABLED VETERANS LIKE ARMY MASTER SERGEANT LUIS RODRIGUEZ ARE LEARNING TO SKI AS A CONTINUED FORM OF REHABILITATION.

RODRIGUEZ: WHEN I GOT ON THAT THING, I'M LIKE OH, MAN, IT IS GOING TO BE HARDER THAN WHAT I THOUGHT. BUT THEN ONCE YOU GET THE FEEL FOR IT, IT WASN'T AS HARD AS I THOUGHT IT WAS GOING TO BE.

LIEBERMAN: LUIS LOST HIS LEG 18 MONTHS AGO WHEN HIS CONVOY WAS HIT

BY A ROCKET-PROPELLED GRENADE IN IRAQ. BUT THAT DOESN'T STOP HIM FROM TAKING ON NEW CHALLENGES. ON THE BEAUTIFUL SLOPES, HIS VOLUNTEER SKI INSTRUCTOR, TINA, GIVES HIM LESSONS.

TINA: AS WE'RE MOVING AND WE WANT TO STOP, WE'RE GOING TO ENGAGE THE BREAKS.

RODRIGUEZ: I CAME HERE WITH A PURPOSE; THE PURPOSE WAS TO SKI. AND YOU SET YOUR LIMITS. REGARDLESS WHETHER YOU HAVE TWO LEGS, TWO ARMS.

TINA: KEEP IT GOING AND TRY MAKING A LEFT TURN. THAT'S IT! YOU'RE A SKIER!

LIEBERMAN: THE CLINIC GIVES VETERANS A CHANCE TO REGAIN THEIR INDEPENDENCE. IT IS AN IDEA CONCEIVED OVER 20 YEARS AGO BY RECREATIONAL THERAPIST SANDY TROMBETTA.

TROMBETTA: WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED BY SKIING IS THAT THEY GET A STRONGER SELF-IMAGE OF THEMSELVES. THEY REALIZE THERE ARE SO MANY THINGS THEY CAN DO. AND THAT ATTITUDE AND THE SKILLS THEY GAIN HERE HELP THEM TO REALLY COPE IN THEIR OWN HOMES.

RODRIGUEZ: THIS DEFINITELY GIVES ME THE ENERGY TO PUSH IT TO ANOTHER LEVEL. I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M GOING TO BE DOING NEXT, BUT I'M GOING TO BE DOING SOMETHING ELSE.

LIEBERMAN: MARINE TOW GUNNER CASEY OWNES LOST BOTH OF HIS LEGS WHEN HIS TANK HIT A LAND MINE IN IRAQ. HE CAN GO ANYWHERE ON HIS SPECIALLY CRAFTED MONO SKI. THIS TIME HE SETS HIS SIGHTS ON THE HIGHEST PEAK.

OWNES: THE FIRST TIME I WENT OUT, MY THERAPIST SAID WHEN I GOT BACK, "YEAH I SAW A WHOLE DIFFERENT SIDE OF YOU." IT SEEMED LIKE I HAD CHANGED AND MY ATTITUDE AND EVERYTHING. MY DRIVE, JUST WANTED TO GET BETTER A LOT QUICKER, GET A LITTLE STRONGER.

LIEBERMAN: STATE-OF-THE-ART ADAPTIVE EQUIPMENT ACCOMMODATES EVERY LEVEL OF DISABILITY. THERE IS THE MONO SKI, THE SLIDER AND THERE IS A SIMPLE POLE TO ASSIST THE BLIND.

V.A.'S DR. FRANCES MURPHY BELIEVES IT IS ALL ABOUT VETERANS REGAINING CONTROL OF THEIR LIVES.

MURPHY: V.A. HAS A MISSION TO CARE FOR THOSE WHO HAVE BORNE THE BATTLE OR THOSE WHO HAVE GIVEN THEIR MILITARY SERVICE. INSTEAD OF

FOCUSING ON THEIR DISABILITIES AND WHAT THEY'VE LOST, THEY BEGIN TO FOCUS ON THEIR ABILITIES AND WHAT THEY CAN REALLY DO.

BO DEREK: IT IS SO FAR ABOVE AND BEYOND BASIC MEDICAL CARE. THIS IS SO GOOD FOR THE SPIRIT.

OWNES: THIS GETS YOU WORKING OUT AND STUFF. IT GETS YOU KIND OF FEELING PHYSICAL AGAIN.

LIEBERMAN: MOST COME JUST TO SKI. BUT THEY CAN ALSO LEARN TO SCUBA DIVE OR ROCK CLIMB. OTHERS ENJOY YOGA CLASSES.

TROMBETTA: THE VETERANS WHO ARE SKIING, THEY ARE ROLE MODELS FOR THOSE WHO ARE GOING TO COME AFTER THEM.

JERRY HALL, VETERAN: ALL WE ARE DOING UP HERE IS WHAT WE DO BEST: SHOWING OFF.

VETERAN: GET TO SKIING, I FORGET THAT I'M IN A WHEELCHAIR. IT'S LIKE PURE FREEDOM FOR ME.

VETERAN: YOU'VE JUST GOT TO CONQUER YOUR FEARS.

BENSON: TRULY A MIRACLE ON THE MOUNTAIN. NEXT YEAR'S WEEK-LONG CLINIC WILL BE HELD IN SNOWMASS, COLORADO, FROM APRIL 2 THROUGH THE 7th. FOR MORE INFORMATION ON HOW TO REGISTER OR VOLUNTEER, LOG ON TO WINTERSPORTSCLINIC.ORG. OR MIRACLES.DAV.ORG.

IN THIS MONTH'S FEATURE, THE FACE BEHIND THE FILE, WE INTRODUCE YOU TO SOMEONE WHO CAN RELATE TO THE VETERANS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE WINTER SPORTS CLINIC.

JIM MAYER IS A VIETNAM VET WHO WAS SEVERELY WOUNDED IN THAT WAR. HE NOW WORKS FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS AND HE KNOWS WHAT IT TAKES TO REBUILD A LIFE.

MAYER: I HAD A REAL PREDISPOSITION ABOUT BEING AN AMPUTEE OR SERIOUSLY WOUNDED. IT WAS NOT POSITIVE. AND I SAID, IF THAT HAPPENS TO ME, I'M GOING TO SHOOT MYSELF.

BENSON: JIM HAD BEEN IN VIETNAM LESS THAN THREE MONTHS WHEN HE STEPPED ON A LAND MINE.

MAYER: I WAS ON A LEFT POINT FLANK, EVEN WITH THE POINT. AND GOING OVER THE DIKE WALL, THERE WAS A CLICK AND THE NEXT THING I KNEW, I

WAS STRAIGHT UP IN THE AIR. AN INCREDIBLE EXPLOSION. I EVEN REMEMBER YELLING "OH, NO" AS I DID A SOMERSAULT IN THE AIR. AND I REMEMBER LANDING AND I REMEMBER LOOKING. AND I REMEMBER YELLING FOR A MEDIC. I FELT NO PAIN WHATSOEVER. EVEN THOUGH ONE LEG WAS TRAUMATICALLY AMPUTATED AND THE OTHER WAS JUST BARELY HANGING ON.

BENSON: THE MAN WHO THOUGHT HE WOULD SHOOT HIMSELF FOUND REALITY CHANGED HIS THINKING.

MAYER: I TOLD MY BEST FRIEND IN THE PLATOON, "I'M GOING TO LIVE. I'M GOING TO THROW AN ALIVE DAY PARTY ON THE DAY I GOT BLOWN UP, APRIL 25, EVERY YEAR.

BENSON: UP AND ABOUT AGAIN, AFTER 21 OPERATIONS, JIM KNEW WHAT HE WAS FIGHTING FOR. HE BECAME PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGIATE VETERANS.

MAYER: OUR FIRST YEAR OF LOBBYING, WE GOT A 23 PERCENT INCREASE IN THE GI BILL EDUCATION BENEFITS. 23 PERCENT. NOT BAD.

BENSON: HE BROUGHT A VETERAN'S SENSITIVITY WHEN HE JOINED THE DEPARTMENT.

MAYER: WE IN THE V.A., NO MATTER WHAT WAR IS STARTING TO HAPPEN, WE'VE GOT TO LOOK AT THAT GENERATION OF VETS, AND WE'VE GOT TO TRY TO LEARN ABOUT THEM, LEARN ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES IN THAT WAR, AND SAY "WELCOME HOME. WE APPRECIATE WHAT YOU'VE DONE FOR US."

BENSON: JIM RECENTLY CELEBRATED HIS 36th ANNUAL ALIVE DAY. SINCE 1991, JIM HAS VISITED AMPUTEES AT WALTER REED ARMY HOSPITAL. HE DELIVERS MILKSHAKES AND WISE COUNSEL ON EVERYTHING FROM DEALING WITH PAIN TO REORDERING THEIR LIVES.

NEXT UP, WE PREVIEW THE NEW BLIND CLINIC AT THE HINES VA HOSPITAL.

"THE AMERICAN VETERAN" WILL BE RIGHT BACK.

END OF TRANSCRIPT